89th Year · · No. 236
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The Washington Post Co.
FRIDAY, JULY

U-2 Pilot Blacks

29, 1966 Phone 223-6000 Circulation 223-6100 Classified 223-6200 TEN CENTS

Out, Plane Lost

Last Seen On Radar At Panama

Intensive Search Is Extended to Chile-Peru Border

By John G. Norris
Washington Post Staff Writer

A high-flying U-2 reconnaissance plane was lost yesterday, after the pilot apparently lost consciousness from lack of oxygen.

The circumstances of the flight suggested that the Strategic Air Command aircraft was on a photographic mission over Cuba, and actually flew over the Communist island on its automatic pilot system.

In announcing the incident, the Defense Department said that the U-2 was last observed on radar flying over Panama and that search operations were in progress between Panama and the Peruvian-Chilean border.

Radio Contact Lost

The Pentagon said the plane took off from Barksdale Air Force Base, La., yesterday morning on what it called a "routine mission." Radio contact with the pilot was lost when the plane was flying on a southerly course off the west coast of Florida.

The spokesman said the U-2 was scheduled to make a turn between Sarasota and Key West, but radar control station ashore reported that it failed to do so.

"Under apparent control of the automatic pilot," said the Defense Department, "the aircraft maintained a southerly course. The assumption is that the pilot lost consciousness, possibly due to anoxia (lack of oxygen)."

The U-2 can fly at altitudes up to 90,000 feet, but pilots must have oxygen to breathe at altitudes above 15,000 to 18,000 feet.

Routine Matter

The Pentagon spokesman would not say which direction the aircraft was supposed to turn when off Florida, but there seemed little doubt but that it was on a reconnaissance mission over Cuba. SAC U-2s from Barksdale "routine-

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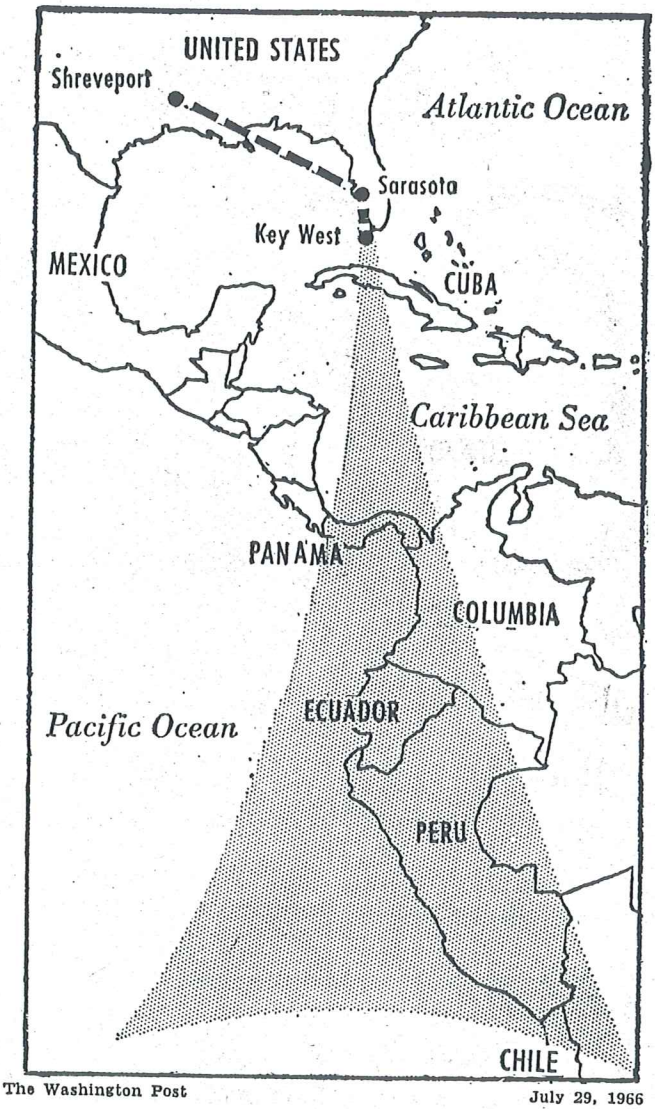

The Washington Post July 29, 1966

LOST PLANE—An air search is looking as far south as the Peru-Chile border for a U-2 aircraft that left course when its pilot apparently lost consciousness.

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Lost U-2 Plane Hunted After Pass Over Cuba

ly" make high-altitude photographic flights over the island.

It also was clear that the southerly course of the plane took it over Cuba. Under questioning, the Pentagon spokesman said there was "not the slightest indication that it was hit by ground fire."

Authorities in Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile were alerted of the continuing flight of the plane southward. It is estimated that the plane's fuel would have been exhausted by mid-afternoon yesterday.

The name of the pilot was withheld pending notification of next-of-kin. Search operations are under direction of the USAF Air Rescue Center at Albrook AF Base in the Canal Zone.

Pentagon officials said they could only speculate as to what may have gone wrong with the U-2 to cut off its oxygen supply, if that is what happened. There have been occasions in the past in which something happened to the oxygen supply of pilots in various types of planes. If the pilot was not flying too high and was able to dive for the deck, he survived. This probably would not be possible for a U-2 flying above 70,000 feet.

Last year, an F-105 was lost while flying from Taiwan to Thailand. A wingman saw the pilot slumped over in the cockpit, but was helpless to do anything but watch him crash. It was assumed that the pilot's oxygen supply had failed him, although it could have been the result of a heart attack or some other physical seizure. The same uncertainty would apply to the U-2 pilot yesterday.